

## Increasing Immigrant Children's Participation in the Finnish Early Childhood Education Context

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### Abstract

The ongoing immigration flow poses challenges to the development of inclusive early childhood education (ECE) in Finland. This article focuses on immigrant children's participation as a means to developing effective pedagogical practices in the Finnish ECE settings. The research method involves collecting large-scale observation data (N=316) based on a random sampling of immigrant children's everyday activities in the ECE context. The results show that the children's participatory action is correlated with their involvement, deepening their level of inclusion in the particular situation. Participatory action is also related to peer relations with a group of children or another child. Role play is positively correlated with participatory action. The results imply the need for more attention to jointly creating and supporting elaborated learning practices and contexts, as well as to understanding the crucial roles of peer relations and ECE teachers in promoting children's interaction, participation and role play. Teachers should develop daily actions and practices to be more accessible and understandable for all children to participate. The results demonstrate that the participation of immigrant children and families needs more effective interventions in the Finnish ECE setting.

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## **1. Introduction**

This article focuses on the participative role of children with immigrant backgrounds in everyday activities during early childhood education (ECE) in the Finnish setting. Research evidence (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2013; Gatt, Ojala, & Soler, 2011; Ojala, 2010) shows that inclusive early childhood pedagogy prevents social and educational exclusion and promotes children's long-term academic success. Furthermore, children's participation is a key concept in today's educational discourse, both internationally and in the Finnish context (Kangas, 2016; Roos, 2015; Virkki, 2015). It has been shown that children's participation is linked with their well-being (Öhrling, 2007), liking of school and higher perceived academic performance, better self-rated health, higher level of life satisfaction and greater reported happiness (De Ro'iste, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin, & Gabhainn, 2011). Children themselves have reported the importance of agency's relevance to their own well-being (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009).

In comparison with many other countries, Finland has relatively fewer children with immigrant backgrounds, but the number of second-generation children born in Finland is growing. Moreover, half of the immigration population lives in the capital city of Finland, and the number is increasing (City of Helsinki Urban Facts, 2016). Based on the information obtained from Statistics Finland for the purposes of this study, in 2016, children with one or both parents with non-Finnish backgrounds comprised 10.9% of the total number of children in the early education age range. It has been estimated that by 2020, children with immigrant backgrounds could comprise at least 13% of all children living in Finland (Statistics Finland, personal communication, November 9, 2016).

There is the evident need for ECE teachers to learn how to work with language and diversity with children and parents from different cultural backgrounds (Jokikokko & Karikoski, 2016; Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016; Hellman & Lauritsen 2017; Paavola 2017). However, there is scarce research on immigrant children's participation and effective pedagogical practices in the Finnish ECE context. To our best knowledge, no large-scale observation based on a random sampling of immigrant children's everyday activities has been conducted in a similar way. This research fills this gap by studying how ECE could support immigrant children's participation. Our study focuses on the assessment of the aspects where participation has the most positive effects and suggests what kinds of circumstances could be the most effective in increasing immigrant children's participation in ECE.

## **2. Literature review**

This study's general objectives are to help enhance the well-being of immigrant children and clarify the processes through which children pursue their paths to well-being in ECE. To achieve these goals, it is crucial to study closely what occurs in the Finnish everyday ECE practices and how immigrant children's participation is promoted.

In Finland, children's participation remains a central and current topic in ECE (Heikka et al., 2014), as well as in the new Finnish national core curricula for both pre-primary education and ECE and care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2016). The new National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2016) perceives cultural diversity as a resource, and the goal of ECE is to promote participation and equity (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). According to Gay (2010), multicultural education is grounded in the intention to guarantee quality teaching in a multicultural society.

When studying participation, it is crucial to clarify the meaning of the concept. It can be defined as referring to the process of sharing in the decisions that affect someone's life and the life of the community where one lives. Furthermore, it is a fundamental right of citizenship and a means by which democracy is built (Hart, 1992). Additionally, participation can be interpreted as taking part in and contributing actively to a situation, an event, a process or an outcome, although the extent of the contribution and the autonomy whereby it is made may differ considerably and may be constrained in various ways (James & James, 2012). Participation means involving and enabling children to take part in the decision-making processes of their everyday lives (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). Furthermore, children's participation can be perceived as an activity of interpreting the world with adults who respect and listen to children and are interested in their affairs (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). From the social aspect of participation in learning, it becomes apparent through shared meaning making and social interaction (Kangas, 2016; Karlsson, 2012; Kumpulainen et al., 2014). On the other hand, it has been shown (Kangas, 2016) that although the ECE personnel regard children's participation as an important practice, children have limited possibilities to participate in decision making, planning and guiding their own learning and pedagogical processes. Additionally, only some research has been conducted about immigrant children's participation in the Finnish ECE context.

Children's own ways of interaction have impacts on the interaction processes between children and educators. For example, Reunamo (2007) describes four different orientations towards change in social situations – accommodative, participative, dominating and withdrawn. Children seem to be more agentive with other children and in learning environments that they have created themselves (cf. Kyhälä, Reunamo, & Ruismäki, 2012). The children's strategies in relation to disliked activities

are often adaptive, and their tendency to adapt keeps increasing as they grow older. The children are also more agentive in their search for alternatives. However, the context matters. (Reunamo & Hällström, 2013). Research (Ebrahim, 2010; Roos, 2015; Virkki, 2015; Vuorisalo, 2013) shows that traditionally, teachers have played the dominant role. Furthermore, Virkki (2015) finds that children place more emphasis on the communal aspect of participation, while teachers focus on the individual elements. Children also regard playing and outdoor activities, as well as informal education, as their favourites. Therefore, there is a need to study what kinds of activities immigrant children orient themselves towards and how participation manifests itself in these activities.

Kalkman and Clark (2017) state that comparatively little is known regarding the connection between daycare practice and policy understanding about migrant children with transnational backgrounds in terms of their social, cultural and historical contexts (see also Kirova, 2010). Dusi, Steinbacha, and Falcon (2014) highlight the importance of friendships and relationships with teachers as children's ways of belonging to their new society. The obstacles of feeling lost, and the lack of both the sense of belonging and language skills are common. Language skills and friendship that enable belonging to and sharing their world are important dimensions of participation. Fostering the sense of belonging presents not only a challenge but also an opportunity for teachers.

Kalkman and Clark (2017) find that specifically, immigrant children's role play can help ECE personnel understand children's cultures and relations. Kirova's (2010) study also demonstrates that an intercultural approach to education could open possibilities for improving ECE practice, where play would be a way of preserving cultural group identities while creating a common culture together.

### **3. Study design**

Considering the need for research in this field, this study's main objective is to answer the following question: Which daily activities have the most positive effects on children's participation?

Using random sampling, the data was obtained from a large-scale observation employed in the Orientation Project conducted at the University of Helsinki and is a part of the Orientation project research data. (see <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/orientate/>).

#### *3.1. Data and participants*

The data was collected from 316 children with immigrant backgrounds from Finnish ECE units (daycare centres and preschools). In our study, the phrase 'children with immigrant

backgrounds' includes both first-generation children and those born in Finland to immigrant parents (see also Arvola, Reunamo, & Kyttälä, 2017). There were 178 boys and 134 girls (four children had missing gender data). Altogether, 71 children had special needs, representing a larger proportion of this group compared with non-immigrant Finnish children. The participants came from 108 daycare centres across 11 municipalities in southern Finland. The participating daycare groups varied substantially in terms of practice and pedagogy. There were units using Steiner and Montessori pedagogies, 24-hour daycare centres, homecare groups and half-day preschools. The number of children in daycare centres and preschools ranged from eight to 37. A stratified sampling was used in the group selection, with a group of children from each daycare unit chosen for the study. The letters requesting parental consent were sent out in 19 languages altogether, as follows: Albanian, Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, English, Estonian, Farsi, Finnish, French, Kurdish, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Swedish, Thai, Turkish and Vietnamese. The exact number of parents who did not permit their children to participate in the research is unknown, but the percentage was low (under 10%).

### *3.2. Research methods*

Between September and December 2014, more than 200 observers were trained how to observe the children. The training included a session each month, with a one-month period for practising between the training sessions. During the training, the teachers observed videos of everyday situations, and the observation categories were discussed one by one. The children's data was based on a total of 7,905 observations made between January and May 2015. The observed activities included general activity, children's activity, the object of their attention, physical activity, involvement (Laevers, 2003), emotional behavior and social activity. In this article, we focus on the participatory type of social activity. The observations were based on a systematic sampling, with one child being watched every five minutes. After five minutes, the next child on the list was observed. When this round was completed, the observations started again, four hours per day for each group. The observer did not participate in the activities. The observation instrument was originally prepared for Reunamo's (2007) preliminary research and is available at <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/orientate/files/2015/12/obs15.pdf>. The data was analysed with the SPSS software, version 23. In the analysis, partial correlations were used to prevent the children's age from being an intermediate variable.

#### 4. Findings

The number of observations under each category was counted together. The data consisted of the percentages of each category observed, for example, the correlation between the percentage of the children's participatory action and the percentage of their role play. The correlations regarding involvement used the mean value of all the observations under this category (on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = low involvement to 5 = high involvement). The correlations regarding physical activity used the mean value of all the observations under this category (on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = low physical activity to 5 = high physical activity). Table 1 shows the statistically high significant correlations between the percentages of the children's participatory action and those of the other observed activities.

**Table 1.** The correlations between the immigrant children's participative action and the other observed activities.

Observed activity	Correlation*	Significance (two-tailed)	df
Involvement in an activity	0.393	< 0.0005	308
Being attentive towards a group of children (two or more children. For example, toys can be included as objects of attention.)	0.381	< 0.0005	308
The observed emotion is surprise, alertness, curiosity or excitement.	0.297	< 0.0005	308
The observed emotion is happiness, joy or contentment.	0.289	< 0.0005	308
Role play (The child or the toy plays a role.)	0.285	< 0.0005	308
The amount of observed contacts with other children	0.267	< 0.0005	308
Children's physical activity	0.255	< 0.0005	308
Being attentive towards another child (For example, toys can be included as objects of attention.)	0.21	< 0.0005	308

\* Partial correlations controlling for the children's age

As presented in Table 1, the highest correlation occurred between the children's participative action and their involvement (Laevers, 2003) in a particular activity. Participation seems to relate to more sustained intense activity, concentration, creativity, mental engagement and persistent behaviour, which characterise high involvement. This may reflect the tendency of participation to be a wholehearted activity. When children participate, they tend to do so in a comprehensive way.

Participation was positively correlated with the percentage of the observed child being attentive towards a group of children or a single child. The correlation between participative action and paying attention to a non-social activity attending towards non-social was negative ( $r = -0.426, p < 0.0005, N = 308$ ). Moreover, the correlation between participative action and paying attention to the whole situation with several different elements was slightly negative although not statistically significant ( $r = -0.092, p = 0.108, N = 308$ ). The correlation between observed participation and the children's attention to an adult was almost non-existent ( $r = -0.050, p < 0.380, N = 308$ ). This means that the immigrant children's participation is concentrated on their relationships with other children, either a group or one child.

Participation was also positively correlated with the positive emotions of surprise, alertness, curiosity and excitement, as well as with happiness, joy and contentment. Several other emotions were observed, but their correlations were negative. The children's participative action was negatively correlated with observed neutral, calm and peaceful feelings ( $r = -0.345, p < 0.0005, N = 308$ ); anger, frustration and disappointment ( $r = -0.187, p < 0.001, N = 308$ ); and sadness and depression ( $r = -0.167, p < 0.0003, N = 308$ ), whereas with observed emotions of disgust and contempt, the correlation was almost non-existent ( $r = -0.077, p < 0.178, N = 308$ ). Participation was thus related to positive feelings. Clearly, the immigrant children felt good about participation.

Participative action was positively correlated with role play. By definition, in role play, children or their toys perform a role. The latter role means that a stick in a play is not just used as an object, but it performs a vital function, such as a make-believe horse. To perform a role in a play or to have a toy assume a role, the child needs to belong to a larger context. There are no roles without a context, which provides motives to the subject. This result connects participation with belonging in a shared context with others.

Observed participation was positively correlated with the children's physical activity. The less the children tended to have a low level of physical activity (for example, sitting, using a pen or eating) and the more they were inclined to be highly physically active (including romping, running and physical exertion), the more they had participative relations with others.

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

This paper contributes to the development of inclusive ECE by producing important information about the connection between immigrant children's participatory behaviours and other aspects of their everyday activities. The study was premised on the question of which daily activities had the most positive effects on children's participation. The children's participatory action is correlated with their involvement, indicating that participation deepens their level of being included in a particular situation wholeheartedly. Participation is related to the ability to focus on something that is within a child's reach. Because involvement is highly related to learning (Laevers, 2003), the results indicate that a participatory role is also beneficial for immigrant children's learning.

Participatory action is also positively correlated with positive emotions, demonstrating the close relation between participation and emotional well-being. For immigrant children, this study found that participation is emotionally rewarding.

It is important to acknowledge that participatory action is clearly related to peer relations with a group of children or another child. This result highlights the significance of other children in helping immigrant children be included in ECE. The results support the research of Dusi, Steinbacha, and Falcon (2014) and also Kyhälä and colleagues (2012) highlighting the importance of children's friendship and a more agentive role together with other children.

Moreover, role play is positively correlated with participatory action. To work out, role play needs time and a function (Reunamo et al., 2013). In role play, children need motivation, as well as meaningful connections and relations with other children and cultural artefacts. Therefore, in shared play, children have the opportunity to make contacts with other children even if it is not always easy to communicate with them. Operating in a foreign language in a new cultural context can add a barrier to successful communication, and the shared narrative in role play cannot evolve (Arvola, Reunamo, & Kyttälä, 2017; Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Kirova, 2010). Kirova's (2010) study also demonstrates play as a vehicle for preserving cultural group identities while creating a common culture together. These results indicate that role play may be an important factor in helping children become the agents of their lives and in the process of building meaningful social roles. The ECE teacher's role is significant in terms of guiding and supporting children's play and playing skills. It would also be useful to co-operate with 'cultural facilitators' (see Kirova 2010, 81) as links between children's interaction and understanding and in explaining the cultural differences in a common play. The results highlight the development and support of jointly elaborated learning practices and contexts. Peer relations are important in promoting children's participation and role play. Teachers can develop daily practices to be more flexible for all children to participate. Participation is crucial later in life for valuable citizenship and for being a contributor to the society. Clearly, more

effective interventions are needed to guarantee the active participation of immigrant children and families in the Finnish ECE context. In the present study, only limited conclusions can be drawn from the research material. In future research, it would be important to conduct a more detailed examination of pedagogical practices and learning environments that enhance immigrant children's participation.

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